

Borne the Battle

Episode # 204

Air Force Veteran Blake Stilwell, Military.com Staff Writer

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/77095/borne-battle-204-air-force-veteran-blake-stilwell-military-com-staff-writer/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:10] Opening Monologue:

Tanner Iskra (TI): Oh, let's get it. Monday, July 20th, 2020. *Borne the Battle*, brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The podcast that focuses on inspiring veteran stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our veterans. I am your host, Marine Corps veteran Tanner Iskra. As always, I hope everyone had a great week outside of podcast land. Forgive me if I sound like Sylvester the Cat. I got a tooth that's bothering me, and the dentist doesn't know what the heck is wrong. So, while I wait for the entodon - endodontist appointment, there we go. I've been numbing the heck out of my mouth with some topical cream from the drug store. So, I'm going to try to keep this one short and sweet, but we got some reviews that came in. First one is from D12Leo. Dirty dozen Leo. I digress. "Five stars. Frozen. I am guessing he is referencing episode 202's deep dive into the meaning of Disney's *Frozen*. It says episode 202 - bingo - episode 202. Thank you for the awesome resources, insights, and introduction to other great podcasts. The continued advertisement and repetition of available programs is in my opinion, the best way to get all veterans. It would be awesome to see a billboard or an advertisement on a stadium to display *Borne the Battle*." I personally would love that. I'm going to forward the Choose VA campaign, your recommendation D12, and tell them that I'm going to need to commandeer some of their budget.

2nd review is from, well, it could be pops, but they made the "o" an @ symbol, so it could be paps. I'm going to run with paps. Pap says "five stars, great resource as a 22-year vet of the United States Air Force. I say, thank you. You provide an invaluable resource to our community. I've been retired from service for 10 years and I'm just now learning about the many services offered us -offered to us. Again, thank you for what you do. FM Master Sergeant, USAF retired." Sir, I salute you for your 22 years of service and I've

hopefully provided you with something that's both entertaining and of value.

And finally, we got a review from *The Warrior Soul Podcast*. I'm guessing that's a fellow veteran podcast out there in podcast land. The one that is, always recommended when I look up *Borne the Battle* on Apple Podcasts. It says "five stars, love the updates about the new things the VA is doing. So proud of the VA for modernizing. I am a career US Air Force Veteran, not a combat veteran. Love the focus on wellness. Your stories about how veterans is also appreciated, Kathy Lowrey Gallowitz." Kathy, thank you for the kind words. Combat, non-combat, you raised your right hand all the same, and vowed to defend this country against all enemies, foreign, domestic. And I appreciate all of your positive reviews because it not only lets us know, but it lets others know about the information provided in this podcast, both in the news releases and in the guest interviews. And as always the more ratings, subs, and reviews that we get, the more this podcast moves up in the podcast algorithms, which allows more veterans to maybe discover this podcast for the first time. So, thank you for continuing to send those in.

Okay. Let's see what we got in news releases. We got two this week. First one says for immediate release: VA offers debt relief to veterans through year's end. The US Department of Veterans Affairs recently announced its commitment to extend debt relief to veterans adversely impacted by COVID-19 to the end of 2020, by suspending certain debt collection actions. The department recognizes veterans and beneficiaries are still being greatly impacted by the coronavirus, prompting the extension of the financial relief. VA is suspending all actions on veteran debts under the jurisdiction of the US Treasury Department. This includes the suspension of collection action or extending repayment terms on preexisting VA debt, whichever the veteran prefers. For benefit debts, veterans should contact the VA Debt Management Center at 1-800-827-0648. For healthcare debt, veterans should contact the Health Resource Center at 1-866-400-1238. Or find them online at www.pay.gov [Link: <https://www.pay.gov/public/home>], for payments. This is good to see. On *Borne the Battle*, we recently broke down the last news release concerning the Debt Management Center with their director and director of operations who are also veterans. So, if you're interested, go ahead and check out the episode. It's episode 190, and we look forward to having them on again soon for a full benefits breakdown on the Debt Management Center.

Okay, second one says VA and MAZON partner to support veteran food security. The US Department of Veterans Affairs announced recently it is partnering with MAZON - Mazen? Mazon - I don't know exactly how to pronounce it. I'm going to guess Mazon, a Jewish response to hunger to improve and ensure veterans have reliable access to food. VA and MAZON will work together to distribute information to veterans, to increase awareness about the risks associated with food insecurity and share the benefits of programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, otherwise known as SNAP. For more information, visit [va.gov/healthpartnerships](https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships/) [Link: <https://www.va.gov/healthpartnerships/>] and mazon.org [Link: <https://mazon.org>]. MAZON is spelled M A Z O N.

All right, so our guest is a former Air Force combat photographer with degrees in graphic design, television and film, international relations, public relations, and Middle Eastern Affairs. Instead of using those, he eventually became a writer. His work has appeared in *Business Insider*, *Military Times*, *We Are The Mighty*, *Fox News*, *ABC News*, *NBC Sports*, *HBO Boxing*, and at The White House. And, he is currently a staff writer with [military.com](https://www.military.com) [Link: <https://www.military.com>]. He was also my TA in Syracuse. He is based in Los Angeles, but is often found elsewhere. He is Air Force Veteran Blake Stilwell. Enjoy.

[00:06:37] Music

[00:06:42] Interview:

(TI): It's good to see you.

Blake Stilwell (BS): It's good to see you too. I – Actually I was, I was just looking for an appointment I got a – my – something wrong with my leg I just – I think I walked into the wrong building.

(TI): I'm not that guy. I'm so not that guy.

(BS): [Laughter]

(TI): And it's funny when you work for the VA, everybody's like, "Oh cool you can-" and I'm like, "No, dude, I'm just trying to learn the process like every other veteran."

(BS): I cannot get your claim adjusted for you. I don't know any doctors. I'm sorry. I can't, I can do nothing. Do you want to be on my podcast though? [Laughter]

(TI): Yeah, and they're like, "Oh, you're the podcast guy." And I'm like, "Yeah, dude, the whole reason I have the podcast is so I can also learn about the VA."

(BS): Yeah. Hey, that's great. And I've listened to a couple of them and you do tend to give out really good news. Like I learned - I learned a lot.

(TI): Appreciate that dude.

(BS): You know, the ones I listened to were a while back, did you ever get out of your in-laws' basement?

(TI): Yes. Yes. Yes.

(BS): So, the house is built? [Laughter]

(TI): The house is built. We have moved into the party barn and I do a lot of the recording now out of the party barn.

(BS): Oh really?

(TI): Yeah, so I have a home office there.

(BS): That's great.

(TI): Still need to get soundproofing, so I think I'm just gonna - I just found a face shield that will kill some of the echo, 'cause you know, it's like an empty basement right now because I still have—

(BS): Hmm. Yeah.

(TI): —I still have a bunch of boxes. So if I just - say that I'm recording monologues, it's like echoey, drives me nuts.

(BS): I feel you, well congrats. That's great. That's big news.

(TI): Appreciate that man. Anyways, so Blake, you know, let's start talking about like where you're from originally.

(BS): I'm from Springfield, Ohio.

(TI): Mhm.

(BS): You know, a couple of people you've had on, you mentioned like famous people that were from your hometown. John Legend is from my hometown.

(TI): Nice!

(BS): And he brings Chrissie with him every now and then and if you follow them on Twitter, you can find out Chrissie's love for the fast food joints that are all in a row.

(TI): Oh wow.

(BS): It used to be Wendy's was next to Popeye's and like, yeah, she just went nuts for it.

(TI): It was like a natural chain for her?

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): That's awesome.

(BS): Oh, the best part is it's about 20 minutes north of Yellow Springs, Ohio, which if you ever watched Dave Chappelle's standup specials on Netflix—

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): —he's talking about that he lives on a farm in a town that never really got out of the 1960s and it's full of hippie white people and they all seem kind of like kooky characters. That's Yellow Springs, Ohio, and it's just south of my hometown of Springfield and in everything that he says about it is absolutely true and it is a beautiful city, it's a great place to go visit, but it is absolutely true, everything he describes. So go check that out on Netflix.

(TI): Very well. Very well. Yellow Springs, very well. Yeah, I guess going back to the famous thing, I think at one time, I said it was Kurt Cobain, of course, muddy bunks of the Wishkah.

(BS): You - you're from a place. I can't remember. It's something about sexual flowers, right? [Laughter]

(TI): Yes. Humptulips, Washington.

(BS): Humptulips, that's right.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): That's how my mind works.

(TI): [Laughter] Sexual flowers?

(BS): That's the mnemonic I gave for your hometown.

(TI): Where's Tanner from? Sexual Flowers, Washington.

(BS): [Laughter] Is that worse than Humptulips?

(TI): No, no, no. You know, and they said that it was an Indian word that meant hard to pole because it's such a thin - it's such a shallow river.

(BS): Okay.

(TI): And I'm just, I just called BS on that. That's BS, you know.

(BS): I mean, Kurt Cobain wrote about it.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): So, you got that going for you.

(TI): The whole muddy banks of the Wishkah - wrote a whole album. No him and you know, one that is still alive is WWE superstar, Daniel Bryan.

(BS): Oh yeah.

(TI): And he brings - he married one of the Bella twins.

(BS): Did he really? I haven't watched WWE in so long.

(TI): I didn't until I found out we had a world champion from my hometown, I was like, "Oh cool." But now I'll always—

(BS): Good for him.

(TI): —I mean, I always pay, I always paid attention to the dirt sheets, but didn't really watch it religiously except for the attitude era.

(BS): Yeah. I watched, I watched the attitude era.

(TI): Yeah. Yeah. But when we had Daniel Bryan, who's, you know, I think a year older than my cousin, he brought the Bella twins - one of the, you know, the one he married, to my hometown and unlike Chrissie, she said nothing.

(BS): Really?

(TI): Yeah. I think what's, you know, what's saddened me a little bit, cause I do love my hometown, but you know, yeah. She said nothing.

(BS): I think if Chrissie Teigen wanted to be queen of Springfield, Ohio, they would probably allow her to be.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): Like, she gets so much love for tweeting about our hometown and rightfully so. She always, she doesn't say anything negative. Like she's great.

(TI): That's awesome.

(BS): Who doesn't love John Legend and Chrissie Teigen, right?

(TI): That's awesome. No, absolutely. That's awesome. So why did you leave Springfield, Ohio? Why, why join the Air Force?

(BS): Well, so I joined the Air Force the day after 9/11 if I remember correctly. It might've been the two days afterward—

(TI): Oh wow.

(BS): —but because everything was like shut down, right.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): Even in Springfield, Ohio, I don't know why people thought they were going to be a target, but, I had always kind of, I always kind of played around with the idea of joining the Air Force because I didn't really know what I wanted to do when I grew up and I didn't really know what I wanted to be and when you're from a town that's, you know, like Springfield, and you see, like, there are other places in the world that you could go—

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): —suddenly you just want to, you want to go out and see that stuff and do something different. I had no idea how I was going to get there. Like, I'm like Luke Skywalker on Tatooine.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): If I, if there's a bright center to the universe, like I'm on the planet that is farthest from. So, when 9/11 happened, you know, I - I'm watching it like everybody else was and I was in my parents' basement and I was just thinking to myself, you know, this is going to be like, this could be the defining moment of our generation. This is, this is Pearl Harbor. This is, this is our Vietnam War.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And nowadays you're either gonna, you know, you're either going to go be part of it in some way, or you're gonna watch it on TV. And I was sick of watching stuff on TV. I just wanted to get out of there

and actually go be part of something bigger than myself. So what do you need to understand about me? And I still do this. I make incredibly important life decisions, basically on a whim.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): I do no research whatsoever and I just go on like, that sounds good, I'll do that. So I went to the recruiter's office. And, I didn't do any research about any of the branches. I just went to the recruiter's office and in Springfield there are one after the other, and the only one open that day was the Air Force. So that's why I became an airman.

(TI): That, that was why it was the Air Force.

(BS): Yes.

(TI): Wow.

(BS): I could've easily been a soldier or a Marine, if they had just been open that day. Sorry guys, you missed your chance.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): But I went there and the recruiter was actually like, he was actually on his way out and he was just like -[Laughter] there's a Wendy's right down the way, down that same street - and he was like had these like stack full of binders and he had like his Wendy's frosty and he saw me coming and like, he was just, he looked at his binders and he looked at his milkshake and he didn't, he didn't want to put either of them down.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): They were equally important. And I was like, oh, this is the branch for me.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): But he actually took me in and he gave me the information and I signed up and I think by October I was off to MEPS and on my way out.

(TI): Wow.

(BS): I went open general. They call it something else now but—

(TI): Open contract.

(BS): Open contract? Yeah. So, I was an open general airman.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And, I didn't get my job assignment till after, you know, like the six or - it was six and a half weeks of training then.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): So we were basically like civilians for six - after six weeks.

(TI): Air Force.

(BS): I know right. I think it's, I think it's longer now. I think it's actually like nine weeks or something like that.

(TI): I say that, but I think the spectrum of the - of all four services, you know, I think, I think the spectrum, you know, I think you've got, and I think from - you have Air Force on one end, you have Marines on the other. And I think you, I think we both get "I would have joined the ___, but..." you know, from the other two services.

(BS): I would have joined any of them, but they were closed that day.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): [Laughter] So, I mean, I could have easily joined Wendy's it's right down the street.

(TI): Exactly, no, I'll give you my - I would have joined the Air Force. I would have joined the Air Force, however, I had a no insurance ticket that they wouldn't even send me to MEPS because—

(BS): Oh that's right.

(TI): Yeah, so.

(BS): But the Marine Corps was like, "Yeah, I'll pay your ticket you just come to my corps."

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): That's a good deal though.

(TI): Absolutely.

(BS): You're up 600 bucks and you get your future.

(TI): Absolutely. You know, I, I jumped at the chance and I was like – and like I said, he sold it as the, “That's the brotherhood of the Marine Corps.”

(BS): [Laughter]

(TI): “That's how we take care of our own.”

(BS): But good on you for paying it back.

(TI): Absolutely. Absolutely. That's - again, that's goes back to the, so the honor of the Marine Corps.

(BS): Yeah. Yeah, I, I had done a lot of work about recruiting recently. I had done a series for *Military Times*, like the complete guide to dealing with your recruiter. But, yeah, it's actually surprising how high the standards of the military have gotten in the last couple of years. You know, at the height of the Iraq War, the Army was just about taking anybody. But what they learned from that was like, that's not valuable to the military at all.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): I mean some people come in with behavior problems and you know, other record. And there's a reason they don't take people with like criminal records. Not that you're, you're criminal.

(TI): No, no.

(BS): You paid it off.

(TI): I did. Totally paid it off, totally paid it off.

(BS): But it's, it's interesting. And like, the Air Force, I mean, nowadays they, they don't, basically, they don't take GEDs.

(TI): Wow. Wow.

(BS): You gotta actually graduate from high school, so it's really interesting how high the standards have gotten.

(TI): I wonder if that has to do with, you know, the economic, you know, if they go hand in hand or not.

(BS): I, I don't know. I didn't really do that deep of a dive, it was more of like the practical stuff for people joining, but, you know, it's not the days where a judge can sentence you to join the military anymore.

(TI): No, no.

(BS): It's very much like you have to come in as like - they're turning people away.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): The military is a prime choice nowadays. It's really cool, actually.

(TI): It is good, it is cool to see. While you were in Blake, best friend or biggest mentor.

(BS): Let's see. Best friend. I don't - I had a lot of mentors. So I was the youngest person in Air Force Combat Camera and the lowest ranking one for a good long time—

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): —maybe 20, 30 years. As a matter of fact, when I walked in with two stripes, nobody thought I worked there. For the first 10 days I sat at my desk and nobody would even talk to me. They were just like, “Who's that guy? I don't know who that guy is.”

(TI): [Laughter] Wow.

(BS): I am processed and everything and finally someone came up to me and is like, “I think I'm your supervisor.” It's like, cool. Let's get started. All right. But when you're that young to the Air Force's credit, everybody kind of wants to, you know, help you out.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And you know, I'd only been in the Air Force for like a year at that point and it's like, oh gosh, I went to DINFOS, I had all the technical training, which by the way, DINFOS is a really, really great technical school—

(TI): Yes.

(BS): —for learning how to be a videographer. Or at least it was when I went through.

(TI): Yes.

(BS): But, you know, the creative part, the shortcuts, you know, the visual language, things like that. I didn't really know all that. I was still doing long shot, medium shot, close up. So I want to, when I talk about, my biggest mentors, I gotta say, it's the whole entire first combat camera squadron. They were really, really good to me. And, you know, they taught me work ethic and they taught me how to

also have a good time. And they taught me everything that I knew and by the time I was done with my service, you know, I had won an award and I had a really great reputation and I kind of had some experience on the civilian side so I had really gotten to see and do a lot. And, you know, being in combat camera is probably like the greatest job in the military.

(TI): Absolutely.

(BS): I know everyone says that about their job.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): But, combat camera was so great because you got to see a lot of parts of the military that weren't Air Force. Like I spent, I think I spent more time with the Army than anything else—

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): —out in the field. And I got to experience a lot of different jobs and, from CE guys who go into your base housing and fix your plumbing to, you know, Phoenix Ravens who guard aircraft and stuff. So, I was really, really fortunate, to go in as an, as an open general troop and get—

(TI): And get combat camera geography.

(BS): —videography, yeah.

(TI): I don't think I've heard many people actually do that.

(BS): No, I have no idea. I could have been anything.

(TI): Wow.

(BS): But to answer your other question, best friend, when I, when I first got out of tech school I went into the Base VI at Charleston Air Force Base - Base Visual Information it's where you get your passport photo taken - and, my first video assignment ever was to do a public service announcement.

(TI): Okay.

(BS): And I - the guy that worked there was Curtis Villavicencio - and I think he actually works for VA out in Utah, but, he was a senior airman and he was - our supervisor had given me that assignment, make a PSA, and I'll never forget this. Like I, this is where I learned early on to have fun with this creative, amazing job you have.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And Curtis and I, we made a public service announcement that wasn't due for air or anything, it was just a training that we did about the health benefits of eating grass.

(TI): [Laughter] Okay.

(BS): And to this guy's credit, and I don't have this video today and I wish I did.

(TI): I know.

(BS): To this guy's credit, like he sat down and he ate grass for the camera. [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter] For the love of the arts.

(BS): I know that's so - I got lucky early on to have somebody who had a great sense of humor and, who also enjoyed being creative—

(TI): And allowed for that creativity.

(BS): Yeah, it was, it was really, really great. Yeah.

(TI): Very cool. So how many years did you do total.

(BS): I think I did five.

(TI): Okay so you did one, one contract?

(BS): I did one. Yeah, I did one contract, but I had to extend to go do the Syracuse program, the Military Motion Media studies program at Syracuse University.

(TI): They made you pay a couple years back then.

(BS): Yeah, it was, I think I did just shy of six, over five.

(TI): Gotcha.

(BS): Somewhere around there.

(TI): Gotcha. Well, you had, you had such a great time. You're, you know, why did you decide to get out? What was the impetus behind that?

(BS): Well, I, I deployed to Iraq in 2006 and I had just asked my fiancé to marry me and, you know, things were going really well, but while I was deployed, you know, I just, it was like one tragedy after another, like my apartment back home, back in Charleston, burned

down, I lost everything. That fiancé started seeing somebody else.
And then my brother died.

(TI): Oh no.

(BS): And, yeah. So I was actually on call to film the prison transfer of
Saddam Hussein from Cropper to the Iraqis.

(TI): Okay.

(BS): And I got the call that morning and I was like, oh my God, this is it.
And then they're like "We need you to come into the office." I was
at camp victory. "You need to come into the office. You have a red
cross message." You know what a red cross message means, right?

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): Yeah. So, no, didn't get to film this, the handover. I don't think
anybody did, but, no, I, I, it was a message that my brother had died,
so—

(TI): And you got that message in country that's—

(BS): Yeah, it's rough.

(TI): It's rough.

(BS): Yeah. So I, I came home after that and I don't really remember the
first part of 2007.

(TI): Sure.

(BS): But I got promoted and I made staff, went through ALS, you know, I
made the most of it. But you know, I was going through a lot and an
I - combat camera was the best job I ever had and to this day, but,
you know, you're, when you're going through a lot, you'd make
decisions that maybe aren't the best, but this one happened to end
up being the best. I ended up getting out early, cause in the Air
Force, you used to be able to get out up to six months early to go to
an accredited graduate school.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And I think you still can. I'm not sure, but I went to Syracuse. I went
right from the military on a Friday to grad school orientation on a
Monday.

(TI): Is that when you became ITA?

(BS): No, that was, see I have many, I have many master's degrees from Syracuse.

(TI): [Laughter] Okay.

(BS): Your VA benefit gives you three years of accredited grad school and master's degrees in Syracuse are one year long. So you do the math. I have three of them.

(TI): [Laughter] Wow. Okay.

(BS): So, yeah, I went right into grad school and the great part about transitioning right from one thing to another is that even if you don't know like what to do when you get out, like here's grad school, you have something in front of you that you have to do.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And grad schools and the undergrads have been taking students who have never had a civilian job their whole life and giving you internships and shepherding you through to get a job. So my first job outside of the military, except for being a TA, was, I did an internship at *ABC News* in New York.

(TI): Okay.

(BS): Yeah. And after that I did the Olympics in Beijing 2008.

(TI): Okay. Or just entered for the Olympics or for a station?

(BS): NBC.

(TI): Okay.

(BS): And then when I got back, my first job after that was, I worked for HBO as, you know, doing a show called *24/7* that follows around boxers as they train for a fight.

(TI): Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

(BS): I did, I think it was De La Hoya Pacquiao, in 2008.

(TI): How could you forget of this De La Hoya Pacquiao? How dare you.

(BS): I only got to work the last week of that show.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): Mayweather Marquez is the one that I worked completely on.

(TI): Gotcha.

(BS): But it was great. And so like, you know, I didn't, I didn't stay unemployed for long because I had had Syracuse University to back me up.

(TI): Mhm.

(BS): So it was a, it was a much smoother transition. And of course in New York state, we were talking about this earlier. They do your Veteran Claims paperwork for you. So I went in—

(TI): Like the state VA?

(BS): Yeah, so—

(TI): Really? That's cool.

(BS): They, they, I, I, take all my records over to the VA office, the VA hospital over there, and I meet with a guy and he's like, "Well, I got your records and we'll fill out the forms for you and let you know when your final exam is." I was like, "Oh, okay, cool."

(TI): Wow.

(BS): And so it was, it was a long time I think it took like, like two, two years or something like that.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): But I got a message in the mail. I was like, hey, it's time for your final exams. Come get it. And I, I did it. And I think six months after that I had had my claim processed, that's it. So, I would say super lucky. I got super lucky on a lot of, a lot of things.

(TI): So, you, you came to Syracuse, you did a master's degree program and in the summer times you would do internships and then come back to Syracuse as like a home base until—

(BS): No. So, I, I was away - I went, I graduated from Syracuse in 2008 in the Television, Radio & Film program.

(TI): Yep.

(BS): And then, you know I did my internships and I went to LA to, to work. And while I was in LA I'd been working as some producer's assistant in Hollywood and then Obama got elected and I happen to know the person who was staffing White House Comms. and she offered me a job to go work at White House Comms. so I did that—

(TI): As a civilian.

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): Gotcha.

(BS): And so, I did White House Comms. for a couple years and I decided that coming to DC every day and, you know—

(TI): It wasn't for you.

(BS): —commuting wasn't for me.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): Like I don't, like I'm not comfortable in suits and stuff.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): It's just not me. Shaving every day? I thought I left that behind. So I decided to go back to Syracuse and study something that - this is the one thing I ever knew that I really wanted to study was international relations.

(TI): Okay.

(BS): And Syracuse has a great public diplomacy program, international relations and public relations dual master's program two years.

(TI): Yeah. Yeah.

(BS): So, I went and did that, and I got to, I got to, I studied abroad in Istanbul. Like it was, it was really, really great experience. And I was finally doing something that I really knew that I wanted to do.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And I was like, well, I'm leaving entertainment behind. I'm so sick of, you know, hustling for work and worrying about a job. It's so great. So, I went to, I - my next job was at the Near East Foundation and I did communications for them. I, it's the oldest international development organization in the country in the United States founded in 1915.

(TI): Oh wow.

(BS): And I got to work taking photos, doing video for them and, you know, helping development programs in the Middle East and Africa, Mali, West Bank, Jordan, Armenia, like all over.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And I was living in the West Bank at the time and that was very rewarding, and I got to see their Centennial and be part of it and the staff over there are amazing people. They do this cause they love it and they have programs that really work - neareast.org [Link: <https://www.neareast.org>], check it out. And I was like, again, I was like, so happy to like, man, I'm so glad I'm not in entertainment. And then a combat camera officer of mine started *We Are The Mighty* with David Gale from MTV films. He was like, "Hey, we need a writer. You want to come over and do that?" So I was like, "Okay, I'll go into entertainment again." [Laughter]

(TI): So what year was this?

(BS): This was 2015.

(TI): 15.

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): So, at that point, that was when I first got out of the Marine Corps was 2015. You were my TA in 2011.

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): Talk to me about using your GI Bill at a, at a private institution like Syracuse. Cause it's a little different than like a state school.

(BS): Yeah, it is. But it also is for - when we're talking about Syracuse, you have to understand that this is like the best school in the country for veterans hands down, for a number of reasons. I know, I know. [Laughter]

(TI): He's looking at me and I'm like "mehhh mehhh" cause, 'cause I mean I went to Syracuse.

(BS): Yeah, you did.

(TI): And I love Syracuse and Newhouse—

(BS): You went to the Cronkite school right?

(TI): I did, yep and I went to Cronkite. So, I went to both. So, I think for me, from a GI Bill standpoint, it was easier to get enrolled and get the money rolling in and get that and get credited and all that stuff.

(BS): And I understand that.

(TI): Yeah. But Newhouse is also, you know, at Syracuse, the Newhouse School of Journalism is an amazing institution with some amazing instructors.

(BS): Right.

(TI): And I learned so much there as well. So, take nothing, you know, I'm taking nothing away from there.

(BS): Yeah, so let me, let me explain why I say that. And I'm sure that there are other great schools that do a lot for their veterans and, you know, make sure they're enrolled and that they're taken care of in the community.

(TI): But you got, you, you got to rep your Alma Mater. I get it.

(BS): Well, it's not just that.

(TI): Okay.

(BS): So, at Syracuse, they will, they will, like, take a veteran and they will get them through that process. They will make sure you do your claims process and they will have you, like, if you have the Yellow Ribbon Program, if you have GI Bill, like they will make sure that you're all set, that you're getting your benefits and that you're adapting to the local community, you're adapting to student life. That's a given.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): But what they do - have you heard of the Institute for Veterans and Military Families?

(TI): Yes. We actually had their director on, well, Tim did before he left, he had, he had them on the *Borne the Battle*.

(BS): Yeah. So, this is an amazing institution that, they're behind almost every study that you've ever heard, and they don't really get the recognition they deserve.

(TI): Sure.

(BS): And now at Syracuse University there is a parking garage that was across from Newhouse, the parking lot—

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): —that's now a building - the institute, the actual Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

(TI): Wow. That's incredible.

(BS): Yeah. And they're, they're well-funded. They have a lot of great donors from Wall Street, big banks and stuff to make sure that veterans are not just well-researched, but like that they're well taken care of. So, like, Syracuse University really puts its money where its mouth is.

(TI): I still got to get my first master's.

(BS): [Laughter]

(TI): I still gotta do my first masters. So, I'm definitely going to be playing to see where, where to go next.

(BS): But what's really great about what they did, it's not just doing studies and advocating—

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): —and writing and communications. Syracuse University developed a two-year degree that anyone in the military can get.

(TI): Interesting.

(BS): You know how everyone used to say, why doesn't my branch have a Community College of the Air Force equivalent?

(TI): Sure.

(BS): Yeah well Syracuse University heard that and with the Army they developed something, it's a two-year degree from Syracuse University. That, that you can get completely covered by your tuition assistance—

(TI): While you're still in.

(BS): While you're still in. That goes under the radar stuff like that is, that's an amazing, amazing benefit that you don't even have to touch your GI Bill or anything, and you can get it while you're in. And it's from Syracuse. That's great.

(TI): Oh yeah. Syracuse is great. That's a great institution. Still looking at where I'm going to go with my master's. I tried matriculating.

(BS): [Laughter]

(TI): Okay. You know how, when you do it, when you do the Syracuse program. And I was going to go to University of Washington and try

to take those courses and have them transfer over at the same time and that that process was very confusing.

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): And that was when, Arizona State stepped in for me. But I think now that I'm not looking at having to matriculate, I'm looking at just online—

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): —the master's program at Syracuse. I'm looking at the master's program at Syracuse. I'm looking at Arizona State and looking at Penn State, Florida. There's all kinds. There's all kinds of them are there, are out there. But I think the important thing that we can say is: utilize your benefit.

(BS): Yeah, for sure. And what I've learned being at military.com, I'm the veteran jobs reporter now, that people do a lot of interesting things for veterans and veterans themselves do a lot of interesting things.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): So, after I leave here, I'm going to go cover a veteran who is on display at the Renwick Gallery across from the White House.

(TI): Very cool.

(BS): But, you know, you don't actually have to use your GI Bill yourself, first of all. If you're in a manufacturing program, the, the VA will teach you to be a carpenter or will teach you to like, auto body work. And like some of these programs, you don't even have to touch your GI Bill. You can give your GI Bill to your kid. But I mean, I just covered something that if you want to be a park ranger in the forestry service, like, that's, your VA benefit covers learning to be a park ranger. Like completely, and you even get a stipend.

(TI): Wow.

(BS): So, yeah, I mean, there's just so many different ways to go, if you're looking for an education. I went the traditional route and that helped my transition, but you don't have to.

(TI): No, no.

(BS): You really just look up where you want to go and for veterans there's a route.

(TI): Absolutely. And you, you mentioned *We Are The Mighty*. Talk to me about that. You became the senior director of digital media.

(BS): I actually, I think no, my title was managing editor for a while.

(TI): Gotcha.

(BS): And then I'm, when it, even when I left *We Are The Mighty* in 2019, I was still like a senior content creator.

(TI): Gotcha.

(BS): Like I still, I still freelance for them.

(TI): Either way, pretty fancy title. What, what was, what was your role there? What did you do?

(BS): So, I did a lot of creative work. And, I would write articles, of course, that was like the basis of the website, but also, you know, you'd come up with ideas for videos.

(TI): You had a podcast.

(BS): We did a podcast called *Mandatory Fun*. Me and my friend O.V. he's over at *Task & Purpose*. And my friend, Logan Nye, he's over at Fisher House now.

(TI): Some entertaining stuff on there.

(BS): Yeah. There was some interesting - every once in a while, I get somebody who's like "Blake, I just heard your podcast." I was like, "Oh my God, which episode?" Cause we were, we were, we were lit for a lot of them.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): You know, I, we'd never done a podcast before and we, you know, well, we didn't make it a thing. Like it wasn't like *Drinkin' Bros*. Like it wasn't an essential part of the podcast.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): But yeah, you could hear the ice clinking in the background.
[Laughter]

(TI): So, it was a little, it was a little freeform.

(BS): It was, and people really liked the veterans sitting around talking format.

(TI): Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And, and that's when I started seeing your, your, you know I think was it 2015 when I first got it, that's when I started seeing your byline everywhere. Still do, you must have generated a bunch of traffic for them. I still see them promote some of the content that you publish a lot.

(BS): Yeah, they do. And I, you know, I think I wrote something like 3000 articles in the couple years that I was there.

(TI): Oh my god [Laughter]

(BS): I mean some of it was just fun stuff like here's like the, one of the last articles I wrote for them, it was like seven things that are worse than hitting you that your drill Sergeant can do or something like that.

(TI): Talking about your titles, you know, you left them in 2019 and you freelance now. Are you still kind of freelance?

(BS): I freelance. So, I write for military.com, a staff reporter for military.com.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): And I do freelance work for non-military things

(TI): Got you. Okay.

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): That's where I'm starting to see your stuff from *Business Insider* and stuff like that.

(BS): Yeah. So, so, syndication is rife around the internet—

(TI): Oh yeah.

(BS): And if you have a good post, like, somebody's going to want to pick it up elsewhere.

(TI): *VAntage Point* [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>] is very aware of this syndication.

(BS): So, *Business Insider*, one of their favorite posts of mine, and I actually talked to the editor, I almost took a job there before military.com at *Business Insider* Defense. One of his favorite posts was something about, it was called "Rods from God"—

(TI): I just saw that one!

(BS): —and it was like giant telephone poles made of tungsten, that they were just dropped from space and hit the earth with the force of a nuclear bomb. I didn't know that existed. So, I'm here learning on the fly about like how a rod could possibly hit with a force of a bomb.

(TI): [Laughter] Yeah.

(BS): And you're writing this stuff up and you're like, oh gosh, I barely know what I'm talking about, but then suddenly it's everywhere. And you're just like, oh wow, I hope, I hope I really know what I'm talking about here. [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter] Overall in your entire career and from what I've seen, you've written some pieces with some unique—

(BS): [Laughter]

(TI): —let's just say some clickbait-y titles.

(BS): Yeah, well—

(TI): And I'm just going to go over a couple.

(BS): Okay.

(TI): We just kind of – “Iran May Have a Fleet of Communist Killer Dolphins”

(BS): [Laughter] That was recent.

(TI): I definitely, I definitely clicked on that one. “The Best High-Paying Jobs That Require Zero Experience”, “*The Simpsons* Might Have Already Predicted the Events of 2020”, “The 10 Worst Armies in the World, 2018 Edition”, Genghis Kahn killed so many people it was good for the environment”.

(BS): [Laughter] I don't understand how that's clickbait-y, so, look—

(TI): [Laughter] Because you want to click on it, you're like, “Oh!”

(BS): Oh, well yeah, but like—

(TI): I mean that's—

(BS): So I make sure—

(TI): I mean they're good titles is what I'm trying to say.

(BS): In all of my headlines, and I don't always get to choose the headlines by the way.

(TI): Sure.

(BS): And all of the headlines that I propose, like I try to let you know exactly what you're going to be reading.

(TI): Sure!

(BS): I'm not like being like, you'll never believe what number five is or something. I would just tell you what number five is, if it is really that important.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): So, the one about Genghis Kahn was one of my favorites because we turned it into a video and Shannon Corbeil, she just kind of read my mind, like she, she read the copy and like the voice that's in my head. Like it was, so I really, really enjoyed writing that one and I really, really enjoyed her interpretation of it.

(TI): And was this the, was this curated at *We Are The Mighty* and then you guys did a video of it on *We Are The Mighty*?

(BS): Yeah, yeah.

(TI): Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha.

(BS): They do a series called Mighty Minutes and they take our most popular posts—

(TI): Yeah I've seen Shannon on there she does great work.

(BS): Yeah, she's great. Yeah. And she's, she's on some episodes of the podcast too. The, let me see, let me read what you got here.

(TI): I was going to ask you, what was your favorite one?

(BS): Well I was, you know—

(TI): And it doesn't have to be on the list.

(BS): I will, I will tell you, oh God, I have like thousands. Like it's, it's hard.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): I will tell you that I loved getting to watch *The Simpsons* for money. I got paid to do that. Thank you military.com, you guys are wonderful.

And my editor there, Amy Bushatz is also wonderful. I'm learning, I'm learning a lot from her. Cause it's, it's a real journalism job.
[Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): So "Iran May Have a Fleet of Communist Killer Dolphins". So, there was, I found that in an old BBC article and I was like, that's interesting. And people would just run with it. It was just in *Popular Mechanics* like they referenced it in *Popular Mechanics* and like, I'm getting like emails about it.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): Like people in my, in my international relations circles are like talking about it like, "What are you writing here, Blake?" So like, some of them are figuring out that I'm a writer for the first time and that's, that's their introduction is the communist killer dolphin story.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): But like I usually end up writing gags about the military and I usually end up writing fun, like lighthearted stuff that's just interesting to read.

(TI): Yeah, I like it. It's like unique. Blake's unique nuggets, you know?

(BS): Yeah.

(TI): It's like, well, did you know about this? Absolutely not. Let me read about it.

(BS): What's interesting is everyone has their own interpretation of what my meaning when I write that is.

(TI): Like a painting?

(BS): So, the comments on Twitter are like, some people call me like a jingoist, like I was trying to like drum, beat the war drums with Iran. Like, over dolphins?

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): Are you kidding me? Like, it's just a, it's just a funny story. But like, you know, people are coloring me with their own brush.

(TI): As a war hawk.

(BS): Yeah. And I'm, well sometimes it's a war hawk or sometimes as a, like a, you're a hack writer and I'm just like, yeah, I am, I, I need money, geez.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): I will write anything. And so, it's fine. However, but it's interesting for me to, to read these things and you need to have a thick skin when you deal with the military veteran community, especially.

(TI): Oh sure.

(BS): So, the Iran killer dolphins one, that happened on Twitter and that went wide. So, it was a way the wider than just the military veteran community. But like, there are some very fierce opinionated people who will yell at you in all caps.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): I got an email today from a guy who really, really hated the fact that I used the term Korean hyphen American in one of my recent stories. And it's like I'm sorry, man, I don't know what to tell you. The guy's name is Snake and apparently, he's like very active in the Detroit free press comments area, but he did not like Korean-American

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): And I mean, that was just today. But some of the biggest things you brought up, world's worst armies. And, so I wrote "World's Worst Armies" in 2015, and it was one of my favorites because I got so much hate mail and death threats—

(TI): [Laughter] Actual death threats?

(BS): Oh yeah. Especially from the Philippines. So, I included the Philippines and let me tell you—

(TI): [Laughter] Of all the countries.

(BS): —first of all, there was no criteria that I used, it was just like, I was working for a military blog and I needed content and I was like, you know what? I'll just rank the worst armies based on what I think is funny. That's really it.

(TI): [Laughter] No science needed.

(BS): Nope. North Korea had to be number one because I mean, come on.

(TI): Why not? Yeah, of course.

(BS): But, you know, I would find like some factoid about some country and like, like, Eritrea, Eritrea is Africa's North Korea. I was like, oh, well, that's going to go on the list.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): In Tajikistan like they actually abduct you and put you in the military, like that's going to be on the list. And so the Philippines, the reason I put them on the list was because they're an island nation and their navy is three Coast Guard Cutters, three old U.S. Coast Guard Cutters.

(TI): Fair, fair.

(BS): And so, to me, that's like ridiculous. It's a fair point, right?

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): Well, the Filipinos don't agree.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): So, I've been hearing about this for years. And, like I even think Rodrigo Duterte threw me some shade recently in a public speech. It's the president of the Philippines, if you don't know.

(TI): Yeah, yeah.

(BS): So, like when I first wrote it, people would just send me messages to my Facebook page with photos of them holding a gun, facing the camera and it's just like, all right, I get it, you're going to kill me. Alright, fine. Get in line. And then like just hate mail one after the other. And it kind of dies down a little bit and then *We Are The Mighty* republishes it and that's why we did 2018, so they'd stop republishing the 2015 one and I can sleep at night.

(TI): [Laughter] It was security.

(BS): So, you know, I have a Google alert for my name in case, you know, something comes up. That's how I found out *Popular Mechanics* had quoted me. So, I get, every now and then I get notices from Filipino newspapers that, "Hey, this is what we are the - Blake Stilwell, *We Are The Mighty* said about us".

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): And I'm just like that is not even a thing anymore.

(TI): You're like let it die!

(BS): Let it go!

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): And somebody had used it to criticize the previous president of the Philippines, like in a real newspaper op-ed. Like this was a real newspaper.

(TI): Look at you, affecting social policy, political change on a—

(BS): It's crazy, why would anyone listen to me? Again, I will write anything for money. You just pay me, and I'll write it. And so, like the most recent one to end that was the president, the current president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte started like, some kind of military parade with "Now we have the *best* military in the world" and I'm just like, is that directed toward me?

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): Like, did he just throw me shade? It's so strange.

(TI): Look at you, affecting political policy in a different country over a drunken blog. In today's journalism and blogging—

(BS): Mhm.

(TI): —how, how important is the title?

(BS): Like my job title?

(TI): No, like, like the title of a blog, of a post.

(BS): Oh, the, the headline, right?

(TI): Yeah, the headline.

(BS): I think it's pretty important.

(TI): I only write because I have to at *Vantage Point*. [Laughter]

(BS): I think it's pretty important. I want, I always want to make sure that if somebody's going to click on something, they know right away what it's going to be about, there's no surprise. Like I don't write for any blog that is going to make you click through a thousand slideshows to get to the point.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): You know, and every organization does it a different way. *We Are The Mighty* does it one way, *Business Insider* does it another way you can see, you can see *Task & Purpose* will have like a three-line headline. Military.com is very like short and succinct, like, you know, traditional headlines.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): But I think the most successful ones are the ones that just, you know, tell you, this is what you're going to read. Paul Szoldra who's over at *Task & Purpose* now, but he taught me that *We Are The Mighty* and he was at *Business Insider* before. That the, the most important thing is the headline plus the photo cause you're trying to stop someone from scrolling through social media.

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): So, so yeah, it's partly headlines, fun, important, but, the, the photo, the eye catching photo, you know, you gotta credit the photographers and stuff, but I think those two are really important and you know, of course what you click on has to be legible, readable, things like that. You need, you don't want to read garbage.

(TI): Yeah, formatted right.

(BS): I think that's important.

(TI): You've been freelancing for a number of years before becoming a staff writer at military.com.

(BS): Mhm.

(TI): If someone is entering this field coming out of the military, what are, what's the one thing that you would want to share that they should know.

(BS): I got to tell you that it's a combination of things. I don't think that there's just one thing. One, you gotta realize that even if you did this job in the military, that you're starting over. Like you're starting from the bottom and you cannot let your ego like bring you - whatever you learned in the military is great, like you learn great technical stuff. I hope that you learn, you use the English language well, but every organization does things a different way. And if you, no matter where you start, like, just remember you're going to start from the bottom and try to learn as you grow. On top of that, every organization does things a different way, and everyone needs an editor, and you gotta check your ego no matter how great your

masterwork is that day, someone's gonna change it. And someone's gonna change it probably a lot. And you just have to realize like you're getting paid once you ship it off to whomever. Like they're allowed to change it however they want. You still get paid though. And you, you see the changes and then you learn from it. And the other thing I'll say is: you may have to work for free, for a long time, especially if you want to work—

(TI): Really?

(BS): Yeah, if you want to work in a creative field, like—

(TI): Sure.

(BS): People want to see that you've been published by other people. People want to see some sort of progression, editors want to see that you can make deadlines and they want to see that you can, you've done work that you've been paid for. So, I mean, you may start out writing for a blog or you may start out - there's a lot of like doctor's blogs and stuff that write about healthcare. I still write for one, again, I'll pay, I'll, just pay me.

(TI): [Laughter]

(BS): I'll write anything you want. But, you know, don't be too proud to, to, you know, do something that may not be of interest to you

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): You may write about Medicare. You may write about, I mean, I still write for free for a blog that is about cocktail culture. It's called *Booze League*—

(TI): Hm.

(BS): —and they, they do a, they have like a podcast and TV now, but their big thing is they put on beer festivals in the Southern California area.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(BS): Yeah, it's great. It's super fun. And I write for it because I like to write, I like cocktail culture. I like craft beer. I love what they do.

(TI): Absolutely.

(BS): Yeah. So, just write for somebody who will put your stuff out there, that will edit you well and make you look good because you're going

to need those pieces to show off to a potential employer. Every time you apply for a freelance gig or a job, everyone wants to know - like send your favorite pieces, send your writing work. So, I have a website.

(TI): Some sort of portfolio. Yeah, yeah.

(BS): Yeah, I have a website that catalogs all these things, never forget it. And finally, be somebody that somebody wants to work with. Be nice, be fun. Get the job done, make your deadlines, and then just be cool.

(TI): Just be a good dude, or girl.

(BS): Yeah who wants to work with an a-hole?

(TI): Good human, yeah. You know, and, and you know, when I first came out and - of the military - and started my transition and, we talk, we're talking about freelance. You know, I picked up a staff job real quick, but I didn't really learn what day rates were, you know, and I'm talking video world. I didn't know what day rates were, I didn't know what the project rates were. I had no clue what that whole environment was. Still for the most part, still don't.

(BS): Mhm.

(TI): Just gleaning what I get from, from the, the producers and editors that came through at NASCAR, I just, I, yeah, I quizzed them. I was like, "Hey, how do you get paid? What, what's what's, what is

(BS): Yeah that's a great way to find out.

(TI): How does it, how does it, yeah, how does it work? So, in the writing world, how does it work? Is it by word by paragraph?

(BS): I think that everyone should have a mentor to help them write. And chances are good that mentor has done work like that before. So, you know, at your level, how much do you get paid per word? Do you get paid per piece? Like sometimes, the, the rate is already dictated to you.

(TI): Sure.

(BS): So, you don't really have to worry about it. I mean, sometimes where I'm at, I'll just get an idea, like, "Hey, I got this idea for X number of pieces for this much money. Will you do it?" And if that's worth your time, then yeah, totally I'll do it. But you know, in the beginning you should be overworked. You should make too little

money. You should just, you know, do what it takes to get your name published and your work published. And just have a passion for making those deadlines. I think that's one of the biggest things that you can really do. When you're talking about pay, day rate versus, you know, word rate versus—

(TI): Project rate.

(BS): —per piece, per project, yeah. Have - just ask somebody there, just like you did.

(TI): Very, very good. What's one thing that you learned in service that you carry with you today?

(BS): Something that I learned in service that I carry with me today. My work ethic. I get a lot of work ethic, I think for my dad, but, you know, I watch people who would be awake for like 54 hours or editors who would be at their computer editing video and they'd fall asleep and then they'd wake up and just pick up right where they worked up.

(TI): [Laughter] Yep.

(BS): Cause you had to make a deadline. And to me, I'm in media, it's a deadline driven world and you do what you gotta do to get it done.

(TI): Very good. Is there a veteran, nonprofit, or individual whom you've worked with. Or you've had experience with that you'd like to mention?

(BS): I think there are a lot that are doing really amazing jobs, but, Fisher House Foundation is always one of my favorites—

(TI): Absolutely.

(BS): —because they're always necessary. I love that there are so many veterans who are doing their own thing in their own communities to help bring up other veterans, their own nonprofits. I just did something about, you know, you did Operation Song, right?

(TI): Yeah.

(BS): I just did a story about a guy who brings veterans to Nashville at the Grand Ole Opry for writing workshops to - country people respond to country music. He responded to country music. He's paying it forward. I think there are a lot of little nonprofits out there that probably don't get the recognition they deserve. But still, it's veterans helping other veterans in the way that they were helped.

(TI): Absolutely.

(BS): So, I, I love hearing about that stuff and I'll write about it every time.

(TI): Absolutely. No, I've, I've, I think I've flipped a couple to you and you've actually written about them. It's great.

(BS): I'd love to. If you're listening to this and you have a nonprofit that you don't think gets enough attention, I'm Blake Stilwell, blake.stilwell@military.com.

(TI): Very good. Very good. And you mentioned Fisher House. Mr. Coker was a great guest on the podcast.

(BS): Oh yeah.

(TI): Yeah, he was great.

(BS): Yeah, my friend David Nye, he's an Army reservist, but now he's over at, he's over at Fisher House. He does their public relations.

(TI): Yeah. Blake, is there anything else that I may have missed that you think is important for the listeners to hear?

(BS): About me or about freelance writing?

(TI): Anything, anything, anything. If there's anything I missed.

(BS): Oh geez.

(TI): This is your platform man. And it's all you. Stage is yours.

(BS): I mean in terms of freelance writing, just make your deadlines and have a thick skin, try to laugh it off because when you're dealing with the general public, I mean, not everyone's going to like you. So many people hate me. It's fine. But, in terms of your, you know, post-service stuff like your transition, go get, go, make sure you know your benefits and go get them. Go because they're there because people need them. They're there because you need them, whether you realize it or not. And if you need help, go get that help.

[00:52:13] Music

[00:52:20] PSA

Narrator: We served our country like those before us.

Man 1: You know, it was a dangerous area. All of Vietnam was dangerous.

Man 2: The carnage of war left an indelible mark on me.

Narrator: We came back and built lives. As time went on, we faced new challenges and found support to handle them.

Man 3: I went to the VA, talked to my doctor.

Man 4: I started doing groups. I started doing one-on-one counseling.

Narrator: At maketheconnection.net [Link: <https://www.maketheconnection.net>] you can hear our stories and find tools and services available to you.

[00:52:49] Music

[00:52:53] Closing Monologue:

(TI): I want to thank Blake for his patience in airing his interview as we actually did that in person, but we did it a while ago. For more information on Blake, you can find him at blakestilwell.com [Link: <https://www.blakestilwell.com>]. That's all one word and Stilwell is S-T-I-L-W-E-L-L.

This week's Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week is Army veteran Ambrose Bierce. And this is a compilation from ambrosebierce.org [Link: <http://www.ambrosebierce.org/works.html>] and from ohiohistorycentral.org [Link: https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Welcome_To_Ohio_History_Central]. An important American author, Ambrose Bierce was born on June 24th, 1842, in Meigs County, Ohio. He received a limited education and left school at an early age to become a printer's apprentice. With the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, Bierce joined an Indiana infantry unit. Bierce was in time assigned to the staff of General W.B. Hazen on which he served as a topographical engineer. In this capacity he surveyed the landscape and prepared detailed maps of the regions over which the Union Army maneuvered and fought. Bierce fought in some of the most famous and horrific battles of the Civil War, including Shiloh, Corinth, Stones River, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, and Franklin. During the fighting at Kennesaw Mountain on June 23rd, 1864, Bierce suffered a grievous head wound from a Confederate bullet. Hospitalized for months, he was back in action in September during the Franklin-Nashville campaign. Bouts of dizziness and frequent blackouts, the aftershocks of his wound, forced him to resign from the Army on January 25th of 1865. In 1866, Bierce left the military with the rank of Major. He then traveled to San Francisco, where he accepted a position with the US Mint. In 1868, he became the editor

of *The News-Letter* and held that position for the next four years. In 1872, he traveled to Europe and continued to write various articles. By 1877, Bierce had returned to California and became the associate editor of the *Argonaut*. In 1880, he became the editor of the *Wasp*. In 1877, William Randolph Hearst, Hearst Publishing, hired Bierce as a writer for the *San Francisco Examiner*. Bierce's primary task was to write short stories for the paper, but he also became an excellent reporter. Bierce applied for permanent transfer to Washington in 1899 and Hearst approved. In Washington Bierce wrote pieces for the *Examiner*, as well as the *Cosmopolitan* and other magazines. He was entertained by President Roosevelt and other Washingtonians eager to meet the notorious journalist and writer. During his lifetime Bierce published other numerous works. He became well known for his sarcasm and his interests in supernatural topics. Amongst his most important books are *Nuggets and Dust: Panned Out in California*, *Cobwebs from an Empty Soul*, *The Devil's Dictionary* and *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. In 1913, Bierce moved to Mexico. He reputedly was unhappy with his life in the United States and was interested in joining the revolution underway in Mexico. He sought out Mexican revolutionary Poncho Villa and joined his army. It is unclear what happened to Bierce beyond this. Most scholars do believe, though, that he died in 1914 while he was with Villa's forces. Just an interesting, interesting story. And you know, if you go to ambrosebierce.org, it goes to even more in depth. Very interesting veteran. We honor his service.

That's it for this week's episode, if you yourself would like to nominate a *Borne the Battle* Veteran of the Week, you can. Just send an email to podcast@va.gov, include a short writeup, and let us know why you'd like to see him or her as the Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week. And if you like this podcast episode hit the subscribe button. We're on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcast, iHeartRadio, pretty much any pod catching app known a phone, computer, tablet, or man. For more stories on veterans and veteran benefits check out our website, blogs.va.gov [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>] and follow the VA on social media. Twitter [Link: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwca], Instagram [Link: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>], Facebook [Link: <https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs>], YouTube [Link: <https://www.youtube.com/user/DeptVetAffairs>], RallyPoint [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/56052/question-rallypoint-great-place-start/>]. Deptvetaffairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs. No matter the social media, you can always find us with that

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[00:57:34] Music

(Text Transcript Ends)